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ABSTRACT

A recent study (Cook, 1989) involving 58 randomly selected South Carolina elementary schools indicated that none of these schools could be characterized as having an "open climate." This paper suggests that this situation may have its origins in the educational reform movement of the 1980s, first ignited by the publication of "A Nation at Risk" (1983). South Carolina's attempt to improve the quality problem was the passage by the South Carolina State Legislature of the Educational Improvement Act (EIA) in 1984; this act was amended in 1985 and again in 1986. Described are EIA prescriptions as well as resulting actions against schools whose performance does not meet the prescribed level. Whether or not the "closedness" of South Carolina elementary schools is one direct effect of the comprehensive EIA mandates is uncertain. However, there is little doubt that any bureaucratic structure characterized by top-down decision-making, such as the one that exists in education in South Carolina, discourages participation, flexibility, and need satisfaction. At present, apathy and rigidity seem to characterize a great majority of elementary schools in the state. (18 references) (SI)

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# EIA -- EDUCATIONAL REFORM OR REPRESSION?

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ABSTRACT

EIA: EDUCATIONAL REFORM OR REPRESSION?

A recent study (Cook, 1989) involving 58 randomly selected South Carolina elementary schools indicated that there are no elementary schools which are characterized as having an "open climate." Half of these schools' instructional staff, also randomly selected, responded to the Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire (OCDQ) designed by Halpin and Croft (1963).

Halpin and Croft designed the ODCQ specifically to measure an elementary school's learning climate. The instrument focuses on perceived social interactions between principles and teachers as well as among teaching staff. The instrument contains eight school climate subscales. The subscale scores, plotted along a continuum, result in six climate profiles. The climate profiles range from openness/functional flexibility on one end to closedness/rigidity on the other. A school's climate may fall into one six identified climates, (e.g., Open, Autonomous, Controlled, Familiar, Paternal, Closed).

Analysis of the teachers' responses in the 58 schools participating in the study revealed that 45 (77.6%) fell into the "closed climate" profile. No schools were characterized as having an "open climate." One school (1.7%) exhibited a "paternal climate." Six schools (10.34%)

had an "autonomous climate;" six had a "controlled climate."

Whether or not the "closedness" of South Carolina elementary schools is one direct effect of the comprehensive Educational Improvement Act (EIA) mandates is uncertain. However, there is little doubt that any bureaucratic structure, characterized by top-down decision-making, such as the one that exists in education in South Carolina, encourages participation, flexibility, and need satisfaction. At present, apathy and rigidity seem to characterize a great majority of elementary schools in the state.

A recent study (Cook, 1989) involving 58 randomly selected South Carolina elementary schools indicated that none of these schools evidenced an "open" climate. In fact, the majority of the schools (77.6%) were characterized as having a "closed" climate.

Organizational (school) climate appears to be a somewhat nebulous concept. However, it refers to the feelings that result from an individual's global perception of interactions and behaviors within an organization -- those relationships that exist among and between individuals and groups that are part of the organization (Lindelow & Mozarella, 1981). One might consider climate to be an organizational "ambiance." Halpin (1966) felt a school's climate was analogous to an individual's personality; it set the atmosphere for learning and could be measured by using properties perceived collectively by teachers and principals. Halpin equates "open" climate to "ideal" climate.

However, other researchers (McCurdy, 1983) have not reached consensus regarding which type of climate fosters maximum student academic achievement scores. McCurdy believes that school climate permits and encourages effective classroom instruction; the climate sets the tone for meeting the school's goals. He felt that a "favorable" climate and high teacher morale positively influence quality teaching and learning. But Null (1967) does not believe that an "open" climate may be the type most favorable to student learning or academic achievement. He concluded that a "closed" climate might be more beneficial than an "open" climate for attaining specific goals and objectives (e.g., raising student achievement test

scores). So, although researchers have not resolved the question of which type of climate most positively affects student achievement test scores, it may be possible to identify factors which impact on types of school climates, as well as factors which may change this climate.

Inasmuch as no measure of climate in South Carolina's elementary schools existed prior to the Cook (1989) study, one can only speculate about the variables impacting on these schools which led to the high percentage of schools evidencing a "closed" climate or atmosphere. However, it is not illogical to hypothesize that implementing the Educational Improvement Act (EIA) (1984; 1985; 1986) may have contributed to this "closedness."

The educational reform movement of the 1980's, ignited by the publication of **A Nation at Risk** (1983) and further fueled by other reports, such as **The Carnegie Report** (198) which questioned the quality of the nation's schools as well as the qualifications of those responsible for education in these schools, spurred the majority of states to enact reform legislation. Within the past three to six years, most states have legislated some type of educational reform. Nine states (including South Carolina) legislated comprehensive reforms (Jennings, 1988).

Historically, South Carolina has experienced severe problems with its educational quality, exceeded only by those of Mississippi. Prior to 1987, these two states vied nationally for last place on the educational quality ladder, which was determined by student achievement test scores. In an attempt to improve the quality

problem, the State Legislature passed the Educational Improvement Act in 1984 and amended it in 1985 and 1986.

EIA impacted on all aspects of education (e.g., teachers, students, administrators, parents, academic standards, curriculum, and funding). Reform this wide-reaching demanded innumerable changes -- changes mandated by the State Legislature for which all districts and schools within the state were individually and specifically accountable.

EIA's attack on the state's low quality education included some of the following prescriptions:

- Increasing academic standards.
- Increasing the effective use of classroom time (including a longer school day).
- Requiring students to pass an exit exam to graduate.
- Evaluating and rewarding schools and school districts (including teachers in the schools) based on measurable performance and progress.

Additionally, under EIA, the State could declare those districts whose performance did not meet the prescribed level "impaired." Impairment could result in the following State Board of Education actions:

- Declaring a state of emergency in the school district.
- Furnishing continuing advice and technical assistance to implement the State Board's recommendations.
- Recommending to the Governor that the office of superintendent be declared vacant, operating with an interim until the Board of Trustees hired a new superintendent.

During the first year of EIA, the State Board declared six districts impaired; to date it has declared a total of nine districts impaired, with one being declared twice.

These mandated changes, especially the graduation exit exam, prescribed student academic achievement levels, and the impairment stigma (or even the possibility of impairment) put varying amounts of pressure on school districts' and individual school's performance. School districts, in turn, reacted by adopting a variety of improvement plans, including models aimed at raising student academic performance via improving teacher performance.

The Program for Effective Teaching (PET), based on Hunter's Instructional Theory into Practice (ITIP) model, was, by far, the most popular of those models districts adopted to improve teacher performance. Eighty-seven of the state's 91 school districts (95.6%) subjected their teachers to varying degrees of PET training in an all-out effort to improve their teaching performance. Within three years, over half of the state's teachers had participated in at least one cycle of PET training. Furthermore, many districts use PET observations/evaluations as their teacher performance evaluation instrument. Additionally, despite the recent findings of Garrett Mandevelle (1988), a University of South Carolina researcher, which indicated that students in classes of PET-trained teachers scored slightly poorer than did students of untrained teachers, the state plans to train the remaining 15,000 South Carolina teachers (Slavin, 1987).

Several districts also purchased Wise's (1983; 1986) Basic

Skills Instructional Management System (BSIMS), which is even less flexible than PET, and required all teachers to religiously follow this prescribed curriculum. This curriculum rigidly prescribes the specific skills and content teachers must cover at a given time each day throughout the school year until students have completed the standardized achievement testing. Only two of the state's 91 districts did not opt for a "quick fix." Thus, in effect, most teachers in South Carolina have lost their autonomy -- not only in their schools but in their classrooms as well. In turn, this standardization may, indeed, have impacted on morale and climate in the schools.

Many critics (Hawley, 1988; Shanker, 1987) of this standardization process believe teachers have been deskilled through loss of discretion and demoralized by the rigid requirements imposed from the top; that these rigid state mandates have created a climate of distrust in schools. Additionally, Hawley, Metz (1988) and Passow (1988) feel that this standardization has prevented teachers from responding flexibly to the needs of their students. Shanker argues that reform efforts have deprofessionalized teaching through standardized specifications of teaching methods and evaluations, that the bureaucratic (top down) approach treats teachers like technicians (e.g., specifies tasks in detail and "teacher-proofs" the curricula).

The Cook (1989) study sampled the climate in South Carolina's elementary schools during what some analysts recently have been referring to as the "first wave of reform (Metz, 1988)." The first wave of reform, according to Metz, stresses standardizing curriculum,

instituting competency testing, and increasing standardized testing. Most reform proposals assumed that only some combination of regulations that would tell educators what to do and incentives that would make them work harder and, supposedly, more intelligently could effect the desired changes. (Metz characterizes the "second wave of reform" as stressing upgrading teacher education and restructuring teachers' roles to make them more professional and give them more autonomy). South Carolina is, for the most part, still in the "first wave of reform" stage.

One of the major purposes of the Cook (1989) study was to investigate the relationship between student academic achievement and types of school climate. However, because none of the schools in the study evidenced an "open" climate and over 77% of the schools evidenced a "closed" climate, it was not possible to identify any relationship (Table 1).

Cook (1989) used the Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire (OCDQ) designed by Halpin and Croft (1963) to measure the climate in the 58 randomly selected South Carolina elementary schools. Halpin and Croft designed the OCDQ specifically to measure an elementary school's learning climate. The instrument focuses on perceived social interactions between principals and teachers as well as among teaching staff. The instrument contains eight school climate subscales. The subscale scores, plotted along a continuum, result in six climate profiles. The climate profiles range from openness/functional flexibility on one end to closedness/rigidity on the other. A school's climate may fall into one of the following six identified climates:

- Open: An open climate describes an organization which is moving toward its goals. Group members' social needs are satisfied; behavior of the organizational members is authentic.

- Autonomous: An autonomous climate is one in which the leader exerts little control over the group members. Members get some satisfaction from task achievement.

- Controlled: A controlled climate is one which is impersonal and highly task oriented.

- Familiar: A familiar climate is one which is under-controlled and highly personal. Members satisfy social needs, but task achievement is minimal.

- Paternal: A paternal climate is one in which principals constrain leadership emerging from the group; they attempt to limit leadership activities to themselves. Members receive little satisfaction for social needs or task achievement.

- Closed: A closed climate is one in which both principals and teachers exhibit a high degree of apathy. The organization is static; group members are not satisfying their social needs nor deriving satisfaction from task achievement.

Analysis of the teachers' responses in the 58 schools participating in the study revealed that 45 schools (77.6%) fell into the "closed" climate profile. No schools were characterized as having an "open" climate. One school (1.7%) exhibited a "paternal" climate; six schools (10.3%) had an "autonomous" climate; six (10.3%) had a "controlled" climate (Table 1).

Whether or not the "closedness" of South Carolina's elementary schools is one direct effect of the comprehensive EIA mandates is

uncertain. However, there is little doubt that any bureaucratic structure characterized by rigid, top-down requirements and decision making, standardized specifications of teaching methods and evaluation, as well as prescribed curricula encourages participation, flexibility, and authentic behavior. At present, however, this is the situation in South Carolina. Therefore, one would not expect to find schools in which those characteristics of an open climate are apparent as well as those in which teachers are able to satisfy both professional and personal needs.

Conversely, the "closed" climates that currently predominate in the schools may be more conducive to improving student achievement test scores than an "open" climate. Perhaps, if and/or when test scores reach the prescribed level, South Carolina may move toward the "second stage of reform." And there are indications that this may occur. Timor and Kirp (1989), in their article, "Education Reform in the 1980's: Lessons from the States," contend that South Carolina's political interaction reform model strategies include informal devices that rely on delegation, discretionary authority, and flexibility in local implementation). Should the State move to the second stage of reform, might school climates become somewhat less "closed?" And, if they do, would this be more desirable as far as further improving student achievement test scores, or might it have the opposite effect?

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